



Thankful For My Strange Little Family by TKDP

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Summary: When a certain group of monster-hunting children and teens are left alone by their families on none other than Thanksgiving break, Joyce sees no other solution but to invite them to spend Thanksgiving with her family.

Thankful For My Strange Little Family

Hello everyone! I'm ready to celebrate Thanksgiving! So, I decided to write the fic you never asked for about a fluffy Thanksgiving break with the Hopper/Byers household and all their friends! (In this story, Hopper and Joyce are engaged. I also refer to Eleven as 'El', not 'Jane'.) There will be sad moments, there will be happy moments, and all other moments in between with our favorite, strange, little family. Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things, nor any known products mentioned in the story. Spoilers for season 2. This story takes place in November 1985, in other words, a year after season 2. The story is rated T for minor swearing, some implications, and some sad scenes. The story is mostly light hearted, though, so don't worry! Anyway, I hope you enjoy!

Thanksgiving. The time for families to gather together to celebrate love, joy, and most importantly, food. It is a time to remember how grateful families are to have each other in their lives, despite whatever differences may have arisen in the past. At least, this is what Thanksgiving should be like. However in Hawkins, Indiana; for a certain group of townsfolk bound together by shared trauma; this just isn't the case.

In the Wheeler household, Thanksgivings had always been an... *interesting* time. Karen Wheeler would prepare a huge, classic Thanksgiving dinner, slap on a fake smile, and spend the day pretending to love her husband, who slept through the majority of the holiday. Nancy used to spend the whole day talking on her telephone and Mike would invite his friends over every day to escape the endless awkward 'family time'.

This would seem like a time Mike and Nancy would want to forget, but for once, both of them were clinging to the memories.

"You little pieces of crap have a *great* time at your old man's house!" roared Billy, laughing in Mike and Nancy's faces. It was early in the morning, Karen was still asleep, but Billy had decided to wake Mike and Nancy up for no apparent purpose other than to rub it in their faces that Karen would rather spend Thanksgiving with her boyfriend

than with her children. It was common knowledge that Karen had had a spicy affair that other women either frowned upon or longed for, and had eventually broke it off with her husband in order to live with Billy, whose father had been more than happy to have him move out. She was so wrapped up in her romance-novel love life that she never thought to ask Mike and Nancy how *they* felt. It actually seemed like she had more or less forgotten that she had children at all. In fact, ever since Billy moved in, he had made it his mission to make Mike and Nancy's lives a living hell, starting by stealing his father's wallet to pay for a fancy Thanksgiving getaway in California with Karen *only*.

"Whatever," snapped Mike. Ever since Billy moved into their lives, Mike's personality had become darker than when Eleven had gone missing. "You couldn't pay me to spend Thanksgiving with you."

"Watch your mouth, boy," snapped Billy, to which Mike sneered at him. Billy suddenly turned on Nancy. "What, aren't *you* gonna say anything?" It sounded more like a challenge than a question. Nancy only let out a resigned sigh, rubbed her tired eyes, and shook her head. Spending almost all of 1985 with Billy had left her emotionally exhausted, and she no longer had the will to fire back with an insult at the boy who so deserved it. Billy chuckled. "Figures. I didn't pin you as a tough one."

"Shut up!" snarled Mike. "She could blow your damn head off if she had a gun!"

Billy only laughed, as though that was the funniest joke he'd ever heard.

"Whatever," Mike growled, again. "We don't need to take this. C'mon, Nance. Let's get out of here."

Mike and Nancy had grown so far apart when Eleven disappeared and Barb died, it wasn't until *another* creature from the Upside Down threatened their lives that they had come together. Now, they both had a shared enemy, Billy. Neither Mike nor Nancy wanted to face him alone or drift apart again, so for once they stuck together, and were closer than ever before because of it. Now that Ted was gone, Mike had assumed the role of 'man of the family', and was

determined to make sure his sisters came to no harm. (Mike would never see Billy as the man of the house, as far as he was concerned, Billy was lowlier than a worm.) Nancy wasn't sure how to even begin to convey to Mike how proud she was of him. Mike had always been a leader to his friends, now, he was stepping up for his family.

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"It's not right, it's just not right," snarled Joyce, as she paced back and forth in front of Hopper, Jonathan, Steve, Will, and El in their kitchen. She was overwhelmed by the stories she had heard from them, about what all their friends were doing for Thanksgiving.

According to Jonathan; Nancy, Mike, and Holly were spending Thanksgiving at their father's house. Normally this would be fine, but it was no secret to Joyce what that *really* meant: Nancy, Mike, and Holly would be stuck eating some TV dinner while watching a thirty-year-old holiday special while Ted slept through the holiday. Nancy would probably be on the phone all hours of the day trying to escape the cramped divorcee-house, Mike would be bouncing off the walls, unable to visit his friends because Ted lived an hour away, and Holly would be coloring at the kitchen table, whining and asking 'where's mommy?' a hundred times.

Jonathan had also mentioned that Steve's parents had flown off to Hawaii for Thanksgiving, not even giving Steve a week's notice, and had told him to make his own dinner. That's why Steve was at the Hopper-Byers house in the first place: When Joyce had heard Jonathan's news, she had immediately called Steve and told him to get his ass over to her house because there was *no way* she would let him stay home alone on the days leading up to Thanksgiving.

Will also had updates on his friends, as well as Jonathan. Max's stepfather wanted a romantic vacation with Max's mother and had surprised her with a spa vacation in New York, 'accidentally' forgetting to pay for a plane ticket for Max. Max was in a similar situation to Steve, except she was staying with her ninety-year-old neighbors, bored out of her mind.

Dustin's mother was working all day and had scheduled her weekend for a 'couple's getaway' with her new kitten (no one knew what *that*

meant). Everyone knew Dustin's mother was even more like a child than Dustin. She wasn't well organized and often thought of her cat as her 'daughter'. It was no surprise that her scheduled 'kitten day' just so happened to coincide with Thanksgiving. Always a kind guy, Dustin told his mother she should go have fun with the kitten. After all, he would probably be the one arranging everything with the relatives if they had a traditional Thanksgiving, given his mother's flighty nature.

Lucas's parents had been called away on a last-minute business trip. The fight against racism was a hard battle, and Lucas's parents, hardworking business elites, always responded to the call of duty if it meant proving that Black people were just as hardworking as White people. Unfortunately, this meant missing Thanksgiving break, though Lucas's parents promised to make it up to him and Erica. They told Lucas to call his grandparents to come look after him, but of course, he never did. No tween in their right mind would actively choose to spend an entire week with their hovering grandparents.

"This is ridiculous!" Joyce continued to rant, pacing the kitchen even faster. "This is Thanksgiving, for Pete's sake! You're seriously telling me *all* your friends are miserable?! No! I'm not letting this happen."

"Joyce," Hopper said, calmly approaching his fiancé. He took her hand and forced her to look into his eyes. "It's going to be okay. Those kids are tough, they can look after themselves."

"It's not about that," moaned Joyce, placing her head in her hands to hide her tears. "We've...we've all been through so much together! Those kids are our friends! It-it's hard to explain...I just don't want them to *have* to look after themselves, even if they can..."

"I understand, it's just-"

"We should invite them here!" Joyce suddenly announced, a light sparking in her eyes. "It's the perfect solution!"

"Wait, Joyce-"

"I like that idea!" Will suddenly said, enthusiastically. A whole week with his best friends sounded amazing. One look at Eleven, and

Hopper could tell she agreed with Will. Oh, how Hopper did not want Mike living in the same house as his little girl...

"I think it's a good idea, too..." Jonathan said softly, looking a bit more embarrassed. Joyce couldn't help but smile: As calm and collected as Jonathan tried to appear, anyone who was around him and Nancy for even two seconds could tell they were head-over-heels in love with each other.

"That's four against one," Joyce proudly proclaimed. "What about you, Steve?"

Steve had come to (secretly) adore the six children, and had come to think of Nancy and Jonathan as his closest friends. "I agree with Mrs. Byers," Steve said, smiling slyly at Hopper.

Hopper groaned. "Fine. But I'm not making food for a house full of *tweenagers*."

"I was making the Thanksgiving dinner anyway," said Joyce.

"And me!" El quickly added.

Joyce chuckled. "Of course, with you, El. We'll just buy some more food. We have it in the budget now that we're both making money for each other."

"We have the money, but do we have the space?" asked Hopper.

"I don't mind crashing on the couch," said Steve. "Wouldn't be the first time."

"I don't even want to know about the other times," grunted Hopper.

"I don't mind sharing my room with Mike, Lucas, and Dustin!" Will cheered. It actually sounded like a blast to him.

"Jonathan and Nancy together," added El. Jonathan almost spat out his drink in surprise, and Steve burst out laughing at El's embarrassing comment. "What?" asked El, in confusion.

"Nothing, honey," muttered Hopper. "I just might need to have a...

private conversation with Jonathan."

If it was even possible, Jonathan turned even redder.

"Then it's settled," said Joyce. "I'll call everyone and ask if they want to spend Thanksgiving here."

"Can I talk to you alone?" asked Hopper, suddenly.

Joyce looked a bit surprised, but said, "Yes, let's go to our room."

Joyce and Hopper walked down the hall, into their shared bedroom. "Okay, Joyce, what's really going on here? Why do you want to accommodate *twelve* people?"

"I can't help it, Hop..." murmured Joyce. "After everything that happened...well...they're more than friends. I see them as...family. Like, my own children, in a...*strange*...way. And families stick together." She said that last sentence so firmly, Hopper just had to crack a smile.

"Well, that's one thing I love about you...family always comes first," Hopper said, softly, while taking Joyce's hand. "As a sheriff who knows just about everyone in town, I can confidently say people like you are diamonds in the rough."

Joyce smiled, and pecked her fiancé on the lips. Hopper always put on a tough façade around other people, but when they were alone he could truly be sweet.

"I love you," Joyce said, softly. "And if you really love me, you'll help El decorate for Thanksgiving." Joyce smiled smugly, while Hopper playfully rolled his eyes.

"I can't imagine her expectations are *that* high."

"You should see her party catalogues," Joyce chuckled. "I gave her some magazines, and she circled just about everything that had a turkey on it to 'buy later'. If you think the price of the food is bad, you should see how much she wants to spend to decorate this house!"

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And so it happened that, because no one wanted to be alone or bored during the holidays, the Hopper/Byers household was now being arranged to accommodate Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Nancy, Steve, Max, Erica, and Holly. Because Thanksgiving was on Thursday the twenty-eighth, the week off started on Saturday the twenty-third and ended on Sunday the thirty-first. Since it was the twenty-first, Hopper and Joyce had only two days to prepare the house.

Living accommodations were surprisingly easy to make. Will rolled out some sleeping bags and mattresses in his room for Mike, Lucas, and Dustin. Since Max wasn't allowed to sleep with the boys, Eleven offered to share her room with Max, who she was slowly trying to create a friendship with after the whole 'skateboard-flipping' incident. She also offered to share a room with Erica and Holly, because Eleven secretly wanted a little sister (and from how well Hopper and Joyce's relationship was going, Eleven wasn't about to rule out the possibility yet). Hopper and Joyce even allowed Jonathan to share his room with Nancy, with the promise that there'd be 'no funny stuff'. (Though Hopper also added, when Joyce was out of earshot, to at least make sure there were no kids in the house.)

While Joyce set up makeshift beds and unboxed extra utensils that had been put away after Joyce stopped inviting extended family over, Eleven set on her daring mission to make her house ready for Thanksgiving. Since Eleven still had to stay out of the public eye for just a little longer, Eleven made daily lists of names of party decorations she copied out of catalogues, and sent Hopper on a mission to retrieve them every day. Eleven would not rest until every table was covered with paper turkeys, every wall was drenched in red, orange, and brown streamers, every door displayed a cardboard pilgrim or Indian. After all, this was her first real Thanksgiving and she wanted it to be extra special.

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On Saturday the twenty-third, Eleven woke up bright and early, got dressed, and bolted into the kitchen. She popped some Eggos in the toaster, and hopped from foot to foot, waiting impatiently.

Joyce woke up not long after her, and chuckled. "Well, don't you look pretty?" asked Joyce, taking in Eleven's blue dress and sparkly hair

clips. "Is this because Mike's coming?"

Eleven blushed. "Maybe."

Joyce squeezed her adopted-daughter's shoulder. "He's going to love it."

"Thanks, Mom," said Eleven.

Joyce smiled at the term of endearment. Eleven had recently started calling Hopper 'Papa', because her other Papa was hardly a father. Not wanting to replace El's Mama, Eleven had taken to calling Joyce 'Mom' instead. Joyce understood, for she would never want to replace Terry in Eleven's heart.

As soon as the Eggos popped out of the toaster, Eleven placed them on a plate and ran to sit at a chair by the door, tapping her foot against the chair leg, impatiently. It was only then that Joyce noticed that Eleven was also wearing a pair of oversized white flats, probably taken from an old box in Joyce's closet from one of Joyce's younger days. Joyce chuckled. "If you want fancy shoes, we could always go shopping." She knew fancy shoes for kids hardly cost a dime.

"I like these," said Eleven. "They were yours."

Joyce couldn't help but smile, she felt so touched that Eleven wanted to dress like her.

"You know..." said Joyce, softly. "Mike probably won't be here for a while. I mean, it's only seven thirty. How about we do something, just the two of us?"

"Like what?" asked Eleven.

"How about..." Joyce thought to herself. "Oh! Do you know how to braid hair?"

Eleven looked confused, and Joyce felt embarrassed. Of course El didn't know how to braid hair, who would've taught her?! "What is... braid?" asked Eleven.

"Here, I'll show you," said Joyce. She grabbed a ball of yarn from a

nearby table (thanks to El, Thanksgiving craft stuff was everywhere), and walked into the living room. Joyce cut three long pieces of yarn and taped them side-by-side to the living room table, and began to braid them. Eleven watched in wonder as three separate pieces of yarn were woven in beautiful harmony.

When Joyce finished the braid, she undid it, and gestured for El to sit in front of her. "How about you braid the yarn, and I braid your hair? Believe me, Mike will love it."

Eleven smiled brightly. "Perfect."

El began to braid the yarn, and as usual, she mastered the skill of braiding relatively quickly. Joyce was always amazed at how smart El was, and how quick a learner she could be. Meanwhile, Joyce braided Eleven's short hair into two small braids, pinning them together at the back of her head with Eleven's sparkly clips.

As Eleven continued to braid the yarn over and over, she began to lose track of time, getting more and more into the activity. Eventually it was nine o' clock, and the boys were beginning to wake up.

Will ran into the living room. "Mike called me on his super com! He's going to be here soon!" Will was always looking out for his 'sister', and knew she would want to know this information.

Of course, Mike would always be present and early. That was just the way he was, especially when earliness coincided with alone time with El.

Eleven jumped to her feet and ran from the living room to the door, tapping her foot on the floor even more impatiently now that she knew Mike was on his way. Jonathan also looked excited, and Joyce couldn't help but notice he was wearing one of his nicer shirts and a new pair of jeans. Joyce winked at her son, he was certainly learning well what women wanted to see.

In about ten minutes, there was a knock at the door. Before whoever was there could knock a second time, Eleven threw the door open. Standing before El was her most favorite person in the entire world:

Mike.

"Mike!" said El, pulling her 'friend' into a hug. Mike's gloomy demeanor disappeared the moment he was in El's arms, and he quickly hugged her back.

"Eleven!" gasped Mike. "You look...pretty! Beautiful, I mean...wow." Mike seemed taken aback by El's clothes and hair, and El beamed at Joyce: the braids were clearly a good choice.

When Eleven eventually pulled back, Holly ran up to El and hugged her, too. Clearly Holly liked having a 'sister' who was closer to her age. Eleven picked up Holly and smiled: She felt like a big sister when she was holding the little girl. "We're going to have fun this week!" Eleven said. It was a sentence she had been perfecting for the past two days. Holly smiled and giggled in her carefree, childish way.

Behind both the children, Nancy stepped into the house. Jonathan picked up on Nancy's nervous demeanor immediately, and pulled her into a hug. "Has it been hard?" he whispered.

"Harder than anything," she said, softly, burying her head in his shoulder. Billy never ceased to be an absolute nightmare, and Nancy could barely go outside anymore without someone calling her out as the daughter of a whore. Jonathan had tried to be there for her whenever possible, but there were things that happened in her house that he never could witness, or imagine.

The adults in the room shared an anxious look: Both knew that the Wheeler children were dealing with incredible pain, and had put up walls around their emotions that could only be broken through by their lovers. All Joyce and Hopper could hope to do was ease some of that pain over the course of the week, and maybe show them what a *real* family was.

"How about I make you three some hot chocolate?" Joyce suggested, with a warm smile.

"With peppermint?" Eleven asked, and Mike smiled at his adorable girlfriend.

"With peppermint," Joyce affirmed.

"And whipped cream?!"

Joyce only laughed and nodded. Eleven could put a smile on anyone's face.

Mike, Nancy, and Holly joined the Byers in the living room, and Steve stood up from the couch to greet Nancy. It was awkward at first, but Nancy eventually hugged Steve. "Hi Steve," she said, softly.

"Hey Nancy," said Steve. "I'm sorry about everything that's been going on...I know it sucks."

Nancy sighed, of course, Steve knew what neglect felt like all his life. "Yeah...it's hard." Steve could tell Nancy wasn't fully comfortable talking about her parents' situation, so he let the topic go. Soon, the three teens were sitting on the couch in silence, Nancy leaning against Jonathan with a worn out look on her face.

"You know, Eleven wants to try to bake a pumpkin pie," said Hopper, introducing a topic to ease the tension. Steve and Jonathan both shot Hopper grateful smiles.

"Really?" asked Nancy with a half-hearted, but genuine, chuckle. "I bet that'll be messy."

"You and Mike help me!" Eleven proclaimed, hands on her hips.

"Whatever you say, Miss El," Nancy teased, but knew she couldn't say no to El's endearing smile.

As soon as Joyce returned with the hot chocolate, Eleven thanked her mom, grabbed her mug, and raced Mike into her room before Hopper could protest.

"Happy Thanksgiving, El!" cried Mike, and hugged Eleven again, as they sat on her bed. "I'm really happy we're celebrating all together. You deserve this. Just please make sure Hopper doesn't kill me, alright?"

Eleven giggled and pecked her boyfriend on the cheek. "I promise he

won't."

"So, how's everything been? The year's almost up!" By that, Mike meant Eleven would be allowed to go outside regularly soon. It had been a year since their Snow Ball dance, and Hopper was beginning to work out the logistics of El starting her freshman year of high school after winter break. The only other time she had been outside was when she and Hopper moved into Joyce's house.

"I'm ready...to go outside." In fact, Eleven was more than ready. She dreamed about the day when she could run around in the park (preferably with Mike), go Christmas shopping, walk along the beach... "I know when."

"When...you're going outside?" asked Mike.

"Yes," said Eleven. "Shopping. For Secret-Santa."

Mike gave her a confused look. "You mean, the first time you're going outside is around Christmas?"

Eleven shook her head. "No, we do Secret-Santa *now*!"

"El...I hate to break it to you but...Secret-Santa isn't really for Thanksgiving. It's more of a Christmas thing. Hence the 'Santa' part," said Mike.

Eleven tapped her chin, pondering that for a moment. "Okay. Then we do Secret-Turkey."

"What?!"

"Santa is for Christmas. Turkey is for Thanksgiving. So we don't do Secret-Santa, we do Secret-Turkey." Eleven smiled, full of self-satisfaction, while Mike could barely contain his laughter.

"Secret-Turkey," he choked through his suppressed giggles. "Sounds like a plan."

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It didn't take long for the rest of the gang to show up, bags in hand.

Dustin arrived first, at around 3:00 PM, repeatedly asking if Mike remembered to bring his D&D game. Dustin was more than pleased when he found out that not only had Mike brought Dungeons and Dragons, but Will had also set up his Atari. (Though Joyce made it immediately clear that the boys would *not* spend all Thanksgiving penned up in the house playing video games and D&D.)

After Dustin, Max and Lucas showed up, with Erica in tow, at around 6:00 PM. Max and Lucas were holding hands, while Erica stood a distance away, complaining about how lovey-dovey and gross the two were. "...And seriously Max, you could do so much better," said Erica when they arrived, so that everyone at the Byers/Hopper house could only catch the tail end of the conversation.

"Shut up!" snapped Lucas.

"Believe me Erica, I feel the same way for Jonathan," said Mike, looking between Nancy and Jonathan with a smirk, when he'd finally emerged from Eleven's room after hearing them knock at the door.

Nancy gave Mike a murderous look, while Jonathan only put an arm around Nancy, smiling and shaking his head. He couldn't help but find their sibling rivalry amusing and strange, considering that he got along perfectly well with Will.

"Great!" Joyce announced, breaking up the argument that surely would've followed if she *hadn't* said something. "Everyone's here! You kids go unpack while Hopper and I get dinner started."

"Girls in El's room, *Boys in Will's room!*" Hopper practically thundered.

Nancy grabbed her bags, which she had left in the living room, and began to head toward El's room, but Jonathan placed a hand on her shoulder. "Where are you going?" he teased.

"To El's room...unless..." Nancy slowly put two-and-two together.

Jonathan gave her as sly a grin as he could muster. He hadn't yet mastered Steve's level of smoothness, but he was getting there. "Why would you go there, when Mom and Hop are letting us share a room?"

Nancy smiled brightly. "Well...won't *that* be fun?"

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And so it happened that one hour later, with everyone unpacked and ready for Thanksgiving week at the Byers/Hopper residence, the whole, strange little family was gathered around the dining room table. It was a difficult squeeze to get all the chairs, plus Holly's highchair, to fit around the table built for six, but they managed. Hopper and Joyce sat at either end of the table, trying to conceal the loving looks they couldn't help but send to each other. Eleven sat between Hopper and Mike, and Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Will sat beside Mike, in that order. Of course, Will sat between Max and his mother. On Joyce's other side sat Jonathan, and next to him Nancy. They held hands beneath the table, hoping Steve wouldn't look beneath the tablecloth for whatever reason. With that thought in mind, Holly was seated beside Nancy and Erica beside Holly, with Steve sitting between Erica and Hopper to give Jonathan and Nancy some space.

"I made meatloaf," Joyce announced, smiling at each person seated at her dinner table in turn. "I hope you don't mind if it's a little burnt."

The meatloaf was more than a little burnt. Somehow, the outside was black as coal while the inside was moist and undercooked. Clearly, meatloaf wasn't one of Joyce's specialties. But the group was still happy, because they were altogether as a family. Still, they envied Holly, who had been served pasta and cut-up carrots.

"Toast," Eleven said, suddenly. She had heard people say that in the movies before saying really nice stuff about the people they ate dinner with, and was determined to 'toast', herself. Eleven paused for a long time, trying to put the proper words in order.

"A toast to..." guided Hopper. He remembered when Eleven learned that word, he had had to explain that 'toast', a proclamation, had nothing to do with 'toaster', the delightful machine that cooked her Eggos.

Everyone waited in silence, wanting to hear what Eleven had to say. Even Holly was quiet, seeming to sense that something important was

happening.

"A toast to..." Eleven began again. "The greatest...*family*..." She breathed deeply, wanting to phrase this right. "...in the world."

Aww, this was so fun to write! Sorry if this chapter was a little all over the place, beginnings are always tough for me. Still, I hope you enjoyed! Be prepared for much more family fluff, bonding, and even some emotional healing. (The Byers/Hopper clan has a lot of work to do in the emotional healing area, since everyone living with them was sort of abandoned!) Some of the stuff I wrote doesn't totally correspond with the show (for instance, I don't think Dustin or Lucas would be abandoned by their parents) but I wanted an excuse to have everyone stay together for Thanksgiving! On that note, please don't berate me for breaking up Karen and Ted, I know it probably won't happen but some people think it will, and quite frankly I hope it does because that will add a new, emotional layer to season 3. I hope you all enjoyed, I will try to update soon! P.S., this story will definitely run past Thanksgiving.